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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 007171

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: MORE ARRESTS: GOVERNMENT-MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD
TENSIONS RATCHETED UP

REF: A. CAIRO 6902

[1](#)B. CAIRO 5709

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stuart Jones, for reasons 1.5
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Egyptian security services arrested between 140-200 Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members (many of them college students) between December 14-16. The dragnet included one of the most senior leaders in the MB's hierarchy. Detainees are reportedly being charged with "terrorism" and "forming paramilitary militias." The detentions come in the wake of a December 10 demonstration at Al Azhar University by 50 black-clad, mask-wearing students, demonstrating against the temporary expulsion of leaders of the Free Students Union, a "shadow" student government organization created after MB-affiliated students were largely shut-out of participating in recent campus elections. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On December 14, security forces reportedly detained between 140-180 MB members (most of them students at the famed Al Azhar University), among them Khairat el-Shatir, the MB's Second Deputy Chairman and the third-highest ranking official in the MB's hierarchy. El-Shatir is also rumored to be one of the MB's key financiers. According to the MB's website, three more MB members were detained December 14 in the northern governorate of Menoufiyah, and at least a dozen more MB members were detained on December 16 in the northern Egyptian town of Dakahlia. This wave of arrests came just a few days after prominent MB figures Essam El Erian and Mohamed Mursi were released following seven months of being held without charge.

[1](#)3. (SBU) According to the independent newspaper Nahdet Misr, the Higher State Security Prosecution is formally charging the latest detainees with "terrorism, forming paramilitary militias, and training MB members on combat activities in preparation for dispatching them to ... Iraq and Palestine." El Shatir is also being accused of financing the MB. The State Security Attorney's office reportedly stated that "sharp weapons and chains" were confiscated from some MB members at the time of the arrests. MB Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef released a December 15 statement condemning the arrests, terming them an "unjustified escalation that adds fuel to the fire." He added that the arrest of "someone of El Shater's level" is a "smoke bomb" to cover up the passing of the upcoming constitutional amendments according to the government's wishes.

[1](#)4. (C) The latest arrests came against a backdrop of controversy following a December 10 demonstration organized by MB-affiliated students at Al Azhar University, protesting the suspension of leaders of the Free Student Union (FSU).

The FSU is a "shadow" student government organization formed on several university campuses by MB-affiliated students, together with student supporters of Al Wafd, Nasserites, and Kefaya, following the large-scale disqualification of MB-affiliated students from nationwide campus elections last month (ref A). The December 10 protest at Al Azhar included a martial arts show by 50 black-clad, mask-wearing students in front of the office of the university president. Written on the students' masks was the word "Samidun" ("resistance to the end").

15. (SBU) The media reacted strongly to this unprecedented martial arts display. There have been numerous television and newspaper commentaries condemning the MB students' new militancy. MB Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib released a statement distancing the MB: "That was only a play they were performing inside the campus ... I am very surprised ... We are a peaceful group." He also said the MB will take unspecified disciplinary measures against the students. Prior to the December 14 arrests, the students released a statement apologizing "for this skit ... It reflected poorly on our school and ourselves by making us look like a militia. This image is absolutely untrue. We are students. We did this skit because we felt that no one was listening ... to our requests for justice in the university. The university administration, in cooperation with the security apparatus, has denied us our rights to participate in student union elections."

16. (SBU) Following heated parliamentary debate on December 17, the People's Assembly agreed to form a special committee to "study the recent incidents at Al Azhar." The Parliament rejected a request by MB MP's to form a fact-finding committee to "investigate the Al Azhar University unrest, the alleged rigging of student elections, and security harassment

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at various universities." According to press reports, MB parliamentarians charged that the Al Azhar incidents were "blown out of proportion" to "cover up for the government's crises," and noted that the students were "courageous enough to apologize." NDP parliamentarians reportedly called for "violently confronting any attempt to depart from legitimacy and law."

17. (C) Comment: While arrests of MB supporters are not a new development (over the past three months, at least 100 MB members were detained, many of whom are still being held without charge, and, as reported ref B, scores more were arrested earlier this year), these most recent detentions are notable for their size and scope. El Shatir is the highest-ranking MB official arrested since the detention of Mahmoud Ezzat (secretary-general of the Guidance Office), who was held for three months this summer. The December 10 demonstration at Al Azhar also represents a departure from the MB's usually more cautious posture. Local analysts have alternatively characterized it as an indicator of radicalization of sub-groups of the MB, a sign that the MB's leadership is not able to exert discipline over all members, or simply misguided youthful theatrics. The MB leadership is now focused on damage control. They were embarrassed by the martial display, particularly in light of the effort invested since the MB's gains in the 2005 parliamentary elections in trying to assure Egyptians of the group's moderate cast.
JONES